How Character Structure is formed: A brief, somatic approach informed by the work of Wilhelm Reich, David Boadella, Christopher Bollas, and Stephen M. Johnson, Michael Soth

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Character formation involves a decision-making process under stressful conditions: to adapt and remain "outside" our essential self, or lose the company of family, community community and culture. The completion of this forced adaptation requires an uncomfortable turning against the self…a "counter-pulsation" against our Essence/True Self and the intelligence of our individual piece of the "life force". What is healing and satisfying and what feels so "right" about working through these adaptive decisions is the moment when we reinhabit the Life Field circle of a coherent, clear and balanced state of self-organization and feel reunited with our essential selves (True Self) again. The role of the therapist is to provide a "facilitating" (Winnicott) relational environment where we help the client find the "through-line" of their destiny and avoid the painful confusion of living in the shadow of a fated life.

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5 Stages of Character Development: Character Formation and Counter-pulsation

Inspired by Soth's short exposition of the Johnson ModelConflict and the Structuring of Character: Steven Johnson Ph.D. Soth (1995)

1/ *Self Affirmation*: Experience and expression of instinctual need.

- **Action toward the meeting of personal and biological needs**
- **Instinctual activity**
- **Organization toward action expressive**

Commentary

Basic Human Needs

This first stage of Character Development implies that human activity is organized as a response to intrinsic human needs that form an underlying motivational system experienced variously as movement impulses, thought, fantasy, longings, emotions, sensations ("tissue" arousal), and essential knowing.

Ironically, "human need" is a forgotten and neglected topic in clinical and social psychology. As somatic psychotherapists/Biosynthesis practitioners, we understand that our human needs are experienced and expressed holistically by the entire organism in multiple channels of expression: motoric, cognitive, relational, imaginal, emotional, energetic and in the essential realm. Essentially, we could see the Life Fields Model is a model of human needs, essential needs pursued in multiple realms of human activity.

This first stage of character development is the stage of ideal "natural functioning". Needs emerge and are expressed, thoughtlessly in an embodied manner. Our expressions are responded to by our caregivers in a timely manner, preventing excessive hyperarousal and reactivity. Assuming there is no pre- or peri-natal crisis, a normal gestation, and relatively non-traumatic birth, the newborn arrives prepared to signal for and efficiently use available nutritional sources and supports that meet natural, basic needs.

Such events are not recorded as explicit memories as they conform to our evolutionary expectation that we are entering a providing environment where are expressions will elicit a reciprocal response. This is "the deal" we signed on for (Hartmann). Memory is formed by the intensity of our emotional reactions to events, internal and interpersonal and is often available only as implicit/somatic memory

We "affirm" ourselves as a biological intelligence, a sentient and mobile organism who can sense and respond to arising sensations of need (hunger, isolation, warmth, engagement, curiosity). We are born with our needs system intact, and we are responsive to need satisfaction. We are evolutionarily organized to internally sense the level of satisfaction of our needs. Basic needs are the motivational heart of human activity. Our motivations often stay hidden even from ourselves as nervous system excitement of participating in life and the "going-on-being" crowd out awareness of the underlying motivational schema. Without sensitive parenting we can easily become confused and conflicted about our needs. There is so much to pay attention to in lived experience, especially when we are young and not yet put together, we are always at the edge of disorganization without sensitive caregiving.

Many of these internal needs assessments take the form of a "balancing polarities" dynamic: Too Much/Not Enough, Yes/No. When we find the "sweet spot" of needs satisfaction a sense of well-being emerges, and we have a space for pleasurable engagement with ourselves and the world, and are reinforced as a **competent self**.

2/ *Negative Environmental Response*: A blocking, denying, frustrating, negating response to the expression of need.

- **Absence of normal responsivity to manageable frustration through satisfying action by caregivers (recovered balance)**

- **Need-charge-tension-discharge-relaxation cycles are facilitated by sensitive caregiving and by developmentally accurate dialogue which facilitates self-understanding**

- **Activation of Ventral Vagal system: Regulation via arousal processing in contact and connection. (Social Engagement System) (Porges)**

- **First level response to frustration: activation, scanning, signaling, reaching, visual cueing**

Commentary

Our expressions of need in childhood include spontaneous expressive movement, somatic responses, attempts at signaling and the demonstrating of mounting frustration.

When the flow toward need and satisfaction is interrupted by a limiting or under-responsive human environment, by unexpected difficulties, by cultural prohibitions, by social shaming, by emotional overwhelm, by chaotic and unmediated negative response, we experience a degree of confusion, a sense of threat (mild paranoia about the world), a challenging level of ego disorganization, growing fear, a loss of ground, center and focus.

Some frustration and disorganization is inevitable but with sensitive caregiving we move back into balance, regaining self-contact, and learning to wait as we understand the reasonable needs of others and the world.

3/ The Organismic "Reaction": the natural, hard-wired response of hyper-arousal to unexpected or prolonged or chronic frustration

- **Secondary hard-wired response: distress call signaling serious dysregulation and the need for an immediate response; loss of self-coherence**

- **Third Level response: Arousal and disorganization felt to be life threatening**

- **Stimulation of the ANS survival center (fight, flight, negotiation-under-stress, fawn, freeze) and the required psychological maneuvers (splitting, dissociation, depersonalization, numbing)**

Commentary: When frustration builds to the point of disorganization.

When we reach for what our organismic-self needs, and there is denial or prolonged non-responsiveness or even aggression, what happens in our bodies?

Extreme feeling states without relief cannot be sustained. We are not designed for that. We try to find a way out of dangerous levels of arousal. Our evolutional experience has created a number of pathways back into some kind of self-organization. At this stage the essential self/true self is in significant danger.

4/ *Self-Negation*: Internalization of environmental deficits, withdrawal of self-support

- **Blocking of original impulse AND blocking of the frustration and mobilization/activation impulses.**

- **rage and terror give way to resignation and hopelessness**

- **anti-libidinal energy increases**

- **pleasure-seeking through need satisfaction becomes confused**

- **Scenario of developmental trauma**

- **False-self, splitting of psyche-soma (Winnicott)**

- **Redirection of psychic energy toward negative internalized objects/ Internal Working Models of Insecure Attachment**

"It is this identification with the environment that sets the person against herself, makes the block to self-expression internal and creates

psychopathology" (Stephen Johnson)

5/ *Adjustment Process*: Making the best of it

- **Amnesia, dissociation,**
- **Loss of direction**
- **Loss of instinct**
- **Loss of response to available contact, help, and stimulation**
- **To contain affects of the self-negation process (shame etc)**
- **Compensate for what was lost**

What's the point?

Understand the centrality of human needs

Take a good early life and trauma history

Attend to the shadow of insecure attachment relationships in the transference. Create a safe relational environment.

Be alert to self-negation statements, acts of self-indifference, emotional attacks on the self,

Be prepared for the difficulty of moving through counter-pulsations, confusion, terror, and chaotic rage

Trust the self-righting capacity of the client expressed as an eagerness to re-metabolize the experience-affect-relationship triangle.

Appendix:

One aspect of David Boadella's approach to Character Development: Use of Polarity to understand the organization of false-self experience

C H A R G E , G R O U N D , F O C U S

Charge is to do with the vital impulses of the metabolic centres from the endoderm. It is generated by breathing, by contact, and by energy from good nutrition.

Grounding is to do with the vital energy of the mesoderm. It is sustained by muscular activity, and muscle tonus.

Boundary formation is achieved by the muscle tone and by the ability to focus the mind and the attention.

We can look at impulse, tonus & focus for a surplus or deficient quality.

Impulse: OVERCHARGED or UNDERCHARGED

Tonus: Hyper-tonic or hypotonic

Focus: Over-bounded or under-bounded.

From this schema we can generate eight states of being, which will show imbalance (+ or -) on these three qualities:-

Approximate Lowen equivalent	Charge	Ground	Focus
1. PHALLIC	+	+	+
2. HYSTERIC	+	+	-
3. PSYCHOPATHIC	+	-	-
4. PARANOID	+	-	+
5. PASSIVE-FEMININE	-	+	+
6. MASOCHISTIC	-	+	-
7. ORAL	-	-	+
8. SCHIZOID	-	-	-

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